DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 411 747 HE 030 522

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|---|---|
| AUTHOR | Eiche, Keith; Sedlacek, William; Adams-Gaston, Javaune |
| TITLE | Comparing University Athletes and Nonathletes on Attitudes and Perceptions. Research Report #5-97. |
| INSTITUTION | Maryland Univ., College Park. Counseling Center. |
| PUB DATE | 1997-00-00 |
| NOTE | 21p. |
| PUB TYPE | Reports - Research (143) |
| EDRS PRICE | MF01/PC01 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | Academic Achievement; Asian Americans; *Athletes; Black Students; Career Exploration; College Environment; *College Freshmen; College Preparation; Counseling Objectives; Ethnic Groups; Higher Education; Hispanic Americans; Leadership Qualities; Paying for College; *Student Adjustment; *Student Attitudes; Student Behavior; Student Characteristics; Student Surveys; Time Management |
| IDENTIFIERS | African Americans; *University of Maryland College Park |

ABSTRACT

With a goal of forming interventions and programs to address needs of student athletes (such as group and individual career interventions as well as time management training), this study compared attitudes of 73 freshman athletes and 73 nonathlete freshmen at the University of Maryland toward their college experience. A questionnaire concerning the students' expectations and attitudes about college was administered and analyzed using chi square and multivariate analysis of variance. The athletes included football, basketball, lacrosse, tennis and baseball players. The group included 51 White/Caucasians, 17 African Americans, 2 Asian Americans, 2 biracial, and 1 Hispanic student. They ranged in age from 17 to 22; 51 were male and 21 were female. The nonathlete group included a nearly equal number of males and females, fewer African Americans and more Asian/Asian Americans. Among some of the results, the data suggested that freshman athletes were significantly more likely than their nonathlete counterparts to report: (1) difficulty in getting good grades, (2) greater career confusion, (3) a lack of time as a barrier to college adjustment, (4) an easier time obtaining leadership skills, and (5) less concern in paying for their education. (Contains 15 references.) (DM)

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College Park, Maryland

Comparing University Athletes and Nonathletes on Attitudes and Perceptions

Keith Eiche, William Sedlacek, and Javaune Adams-Gaston

Research Report #5-97

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This study was done in cooperation with the Department of Intercollegiate Athletics and the Counseling Center.

Computer time was provided by Academic Information Technology Services, University of Maryland, College Park

COUNSELING CENTER
UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND
COLLEGE PARK, MARYLAND

# Comparing University Athletes and Nonathletes on Attitudes and Perceptions

Research Report # 5-97

## SUMMARY

The purpose of this study was to obtain a measure of freshman student athlete attitudes and needs concerning their college experience and comparing that to a sample of nonathlete freshmen. Seventy-three freshman athletes were administered a questionnaire concerning their attitudes and perceptions of college, and these responses were compared to the responses of a random sample of seventy-three nonathlete freshman.

The data suggested freshmen athletes were significantly more likely than their nonathlete counterparts to report (1) difficulty in getting good grades, (2) greater career confusion, (3) no time as being a barrier to college adjustment, (4) greater leadership skills, and (5) less concern in paying for their education.

These and other findings are discussed in the context of forming interventions and programs to address student athlete needs such as group and individual career interventions as well as time management training. Future research with athletes is also discussed in the context of these findings.

A variety of researchers have gathered information regarding freshman college students for diverse reasons (Heppner, 1995; Lazar, 1995; Smith, 1994). Often measures of student attitudes, interests, expectations and needs are obtained in order to maintain a more accurate congruence between student services and student needs (De Lucia, 1994; Grayson, 1994; Neville & Furlong, 1994; Villela & Hu, 1990).

Student athletes have been the subject of intense scrutiny by media in recent years (e.g. Cohen, 1993; Kirshenbaum, 1989; Bredemeier & Sheilds, 1985). From student-athletes turning professional before completing their education to increasing reports of violence among players, educators and athletic administrators alike are now more than ever curious about student-athletes' motivations, concerns, and needs. Included in this group of student-athletes are the freshman athletes who are confronted with first year college adjustment issues as well as learning what is expected on the field representing their college in competition. Indeed, the case could be made that freshman athletes have such different experiences from mainstream college freshmen that the entire context of their college experience is qualitatively different (Sack, 1988). In a like manner, many of these freshmen come from high school athletic programs which provided different experiences for high school athletes than mainstream high school students (Lapchick, 1988).

Sedlacek and Adams-Gaston (1992) suggested that student-athletes can be thought of as a separate, non-traditional student group. Student-athletes have their own unique culture with accompanying problems in relating to their university system (Sedlacek & Adams-Gaston, 1992). The concept of student-athletes as a non-traditional student group is relatively new to the empirical research literature. However, there is research evidence demonstrating that prejudice toward student-athletes exists (Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1990). Nonathlete college students in the study tended to feel student athletes had poor academic abilities. Sedlacek (1996) argued that if a group receives prejudice and shows its ability on noncognitive variables then this group may be considered a nontraditional group. Sedlacek and Adams-Gaston (1992) found that noncognitive variables such as athletes' self-concept, mentor relationships, and community involvement correlated with their success in school. Student-athletes find themselves in higher education where they are thought of as different and in many ways this system was not made for them and cannot adequately address all of their needs.

With the recent emphasis on multicultural research, thinking of freshman, student-athletes as their own subgroup of the general freshman population can be an innovative way of being sensitive to differences in student backgrounds. Program effectiveness for student-athletes can increase when more is known about this group. Instead of intervening with freshman student-athletes like they are any other college student,

programs and services can be more accurately fitted to the context of what it is like being a college student from their perspective.

The purpose of this study is to obtain a measure of freshman student-athletes' attitudes, expectations, and needs concerning their college experience and comparing that to a sample of nonathlete freshman. While we may feel that student athletes are nontraditional students, we may not know what form the differences will take so we can plan better programs and services for student athletes. A description of freshman student athlete attitudes and perceptions would seem to be a crucial step in understanding and developing appropriate programs to meet the educational and athletic goals. Furthermore, it is hypothesized that freshman student-athlete perspectives will be different from the general freshman population and these differences will help to operationalize the meaning of student athletes' nontraditional status on the college campus.

## Method

### Participants

The participants for this study were all of the freshman athletes (N=73) and 73 freshmen non-athletes selected randomly from entering freshmen at a large mid-atlantic research university with an NCAA Division I-A athletic program. Athletes participated in a range of sports including: football, basketball, lacrosse, tennis, and baseball. The study was done in cooperation with the university athletic department and freshman

orientation program.

Instrumentation

Participants were asked to respond to a questionnaire covering a broad range of student demographic information and expectations and attitudes concerning college. The questions were either a multiple choice format or questions using a 5-point Likert type scale.

## Procedure

Participants were informed of the nature and purpose of the study and told they could withdraw their participation at any time. They were then asked to respond to their questionnaire and returned the completed questionnaire to the experimenter. No participants declined to participate in the current study.

## Analysis

Data were analyzed using chi square and multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA).

## Results

Demographics

The athletes ranged in age from 17 to 22. There were 51 male and 21 female athletes in the sample and their ethnicity composition was 23% African American, 3% Asian/Asian American, 68% White/Caucasian, 2% Hispanic, and 3% Biracial. The nonathletes ranged in age from 17 to 21. There were 38 male and 35 female nonathletes in the sample and their ethnicity composition was 18% African American, 11% Asian/Asian American, 62% White/Caucasian, 4% Hispanic, and 3% Biracial.

Differences between athletes and nonathletes were found on a number of items. Only the items significant at the .05 level will be discussed below.

Academic Issues

The athletes were more likely to feel it would be hard to get a B average than nonathletes. In addition, the athletes were more likely to respond that they had someone who would listen to them if they ran into problems concerning school as well as knowing where to seek help for reading/study skills when compared to nonathletes. The athletes felt that their high school did not prepare them well for college while the nonathletes indicated adequate preparation. Another academic finding was that athletes cited lecture and independent study as their most preferred type of learning experiences. The nonathletes responded to being able to speak a language other than English well as well as feeling more comfortable using word processor programs than athletes. Nonathletes indicated they would be using their own computer for coursework significantly more often than athletes.

Career Concerns

Athletes expressed greater uncertainty concerning their major and showed a higher likelihood of changing their major than nonathletes. Additionally, athletes also reported having more difficulty selecting a major than nonathletes. Both groups felt that a likely reason for completing graduation requirements was to get a better job. However, nonathletes responded needing a degree in order to enter graduate or professional school

frequently while athletes seldomly responded in this manner.

Social Issues

Athletes indicated a higher possession of leadership skills than nonathletes. In addition, nonathletes showed significantly greater interest in participation in intramural sports than the athletes. Along the same lines, athletes indicated that they would closely follow one or more university athletic teams to a greater extent than the nonathletes.

The nonathletes showed greater interest in planning to join a sorority or fraternity. However, the athletes expected less difficulty in adjusting to the social life in college. Both athletes and nonathletes responded that getting to know other students would be the easiest part of adjusting to college.

An interesting result was that both groups cited different factors as being currently most important for society to resolve. Nonathletes responded more often to crime being the most important factor whereas athletes responded that drug abuse was most important for society to resolve. While both groups cited living in a university residence hall as their most frequent response to where they will be living during the semester, the nonathletes cited a parent's or guardian's house more often than would have occurred by chance.

Financial Concerns

The nonathletes were more concerned with their ability to finance their college education than athletes. Athletes indicated that their main reason for deciding to attend the university was

that it is relatively inexpensive and its geographic location, while nonathletes responded more frequently to the reputation of academic program or reputation of the school as the main reason. Athletes were less likely to plan to work than nonathletes. Related to this finding is that athletes indicated their staying in school was less dependent on part-time work than nonathletes. In addition, nonathletes endorsed meeting financial expenses as the hardest part of adjusting to college while athletes did not.

Time Demands

In responding to barriers to campus involvement, athletes were concerned about having "no time" while nonathletes were concerned that their work schedule was the major barrier.

## Discussion

Some interesting themes emerge in considering the attitudes that athletes have which differ from nonathlete students.

Career Concerns

The athletes were more uncertain about their major and indicated that they expected to change their major more times than nonathletes. This type of career confusion/ambivalence may be an important issue for administrators and coaches to investigate further. Athletes may not have sufficient knowledge of the world of work or themselves as workers to help them in their selection of major. This seems especially important in light of the finding that the athletes cited getting a better job as the main reason for pursuing a college degree.

Developmental issues could explain this career confusion theme. It may be helpful to consider career maturity as a critical variable in for athletes as well as how they make career decisions. The athletes may not have provided sufficient time to explore their career interests during high school. It is plausible to consider that athletes may have their career development "stunted" since so much time is devoted to physical performance. Formal practice time, games, and informal practice time can take time away from being able to pursue career interests such as taking different classes or being involved in organizations that may provide opportunities to pursue career interests. Athletes may expect to change their major in college more often than nonathletes because they have not had the chance to pursue their interests and form academic/career goals effectively.

Understanding how athletes make choices is related to this career development issue. Athletes not given the time needed to gather information and explore career interests may feel pressured to choose a major in college based on little information. A "trial and error" style of selecting majors may be adopted thereby foreclosing on a major that may not satisfy the athlete. Pressure to declare a major is not new to students either internally or externally. However, it may be more salient for athletes due to the fact that they may not have had time or taken the time to develop what they want to accomplish in their careers.

Academic Issues

Another major theme is that of academic concerns. Athletes are more concerned about grades and expect a difficult time in obtaining good grades in college than nonathletes. The athletes felt that high school did not prepare them for college adequately. However, the athletes knew where to get help about study skills if they needed help. There may be several ways to interpret the greater apprehension that athletes apparently experience surrounding grades. For example, it is conceivable that the athletes in the sample have bought into the "dumb jock" stereotype. Therefore, the results may be reflective of negative self-concept issues. However, it could be that with the demands on their time, and a lack of control over their lives could exacerbate grade anxiety. Exploring with the athlete his or her role as a student both past and present may be helpful in addressing this apprehension appropriately.

Another academic issue is that the athletes seemed less comfortable working with word processors than nonathletes. This seems to be an ever important issue with the increasing computer literacy required in the classroom and in the work world. Perhaps athletes have not had the computer exposure that other students have had. Targeting computer comfort/literacy for athletes may aid in overall confidence of the athlete in the academic setting. Also, access to computers may be an issue for athletes based on the data that indicate that the majority of athletes will not be using their own computer during their freshman year. It seems

important also to consider their access computers as a factor affecting comfort with word processing programs.

Financial Issues

A third main theme is financial/employment concerns for athletes. The athletes indicated that they were overall not as worried about the money required for their education. Most athletes do not plan to work during their first year in college, and responded that they would be less concerned about finances than their nonathlete cohort. This seems to be a strength of the athletes in that they do not seem as dependent on part-time jobs to fund their education as the nonathletes. However, athletes stated that having no time was their biggest barrier to adjusting to college. This is interesting in that even if the athletes wanted to work, they probably could not due to time constraints such as time required for practices, classes, games, and homework. The recent NCAA ruling that athletes can now have part-time jobs seems directly relevant to this finding. It may be unrealistic for the NCAA to think that athletes can squeeze a part-time job into an already overcrowded schedule.

Time Demands

Indeed, time seems to have a critical impact for athletes. In a daily schedule that includes classes, practices, games, and homework, there seem to be a great deal of demands placed on athletes' time. As stated previously, time was the most frequently cited barrier to college adjustment for athletes. Time was already mentioned as a factor in interrupting the career

development in college athletes. In addition, time was cited as being a possibility that athletes are more anxious about their grades.

Social Issues

Another interesting finding was that the athletes cited alcohol and drug abuse as the most important issue for society to address and resolve. There was a nonsignificant difference between the athletes and nonathletes in degree they would seek alcohol and drug counseling or the degree with which they experience problems with drugs and alcohol. However, it is an issue that can never be taken too seriously with any student population. It is possible that athletes confront drug and alcohol issues as much or more than other students. For example, many athletes experience the dilemma of whether or not to use performance enhancing drugs. Group programs educating athletes about the consequences in using illegal and/or performance enhancing drugs may be helpful. In addition, obtaining feedback from athletes concerning drugs could be an important needs assessment that could inform interventions on the individual, group, and program levels. Clearly, more data are needed to make more sense out of this finding.

Athletes felt that they would have a less difficult time adjusting to the social life of college than nonathletes. Furthermore, the athletes expressed less interest in joining a fraternity or sorority than other students. Perhaps the time constraints on athletes do not provide time for Greek activities.

Also, athletes have a social support system more or less being in place when one is part of a team. Indeed, athletes indicated they had someone that could listen to them about their problems. The athletes could not designate who this person is, but it is possible to contend that being a part of an athletic team is structured and supportive in terms of making the adjustment from high school to college.

The athletes stated that they had leadership skills to a greater degree than nonathletes. Perhaps being on an athletic team gives more opportunities to be in situations requiring leadership than the average student. This can clearly be a strength in conceptualizing how athletes interact in classes and on the field.

There does seem to be evidence to support the position that student athletes have different attitudes and needs in comparison to the general student population. Interventions may be different for athletes in addressing their concerns taking into account their unique context. For example, academic interventions would take into consideration the amount of practice time required for athletes that may divert time from homework.

Limitations

A limitation of these data is the nature of the instrument which is a self-report measure. Although there is no evidence to suggest that the participants responded in socially desirable ways, it is important to be aware that participants can represent themselves in any way that they wish. There is no empirical

evidence on the validity or reliability of the questionnaire. However, the items were generated by campus administrators and faculty judging the items to be important. Another limitation is the diversity in the sample. Whereas the nonathletes were fairly gender balanced, the majority of athletes who participated in the study were male. However, the athletes and the nonathletes in the sample were representative of the general population of the university population in terms of ethnicity.

Implications for Interventions

Interventions with athletes could take place on an individual, group, or program level. Since academic concerns seem salient for athletes, intervention on a program level seems appropriate for athletes. This could include computer literacy/training as well as academic support for athletes so that the anxiety level decreases concerning grades. In addition, academic counseling could be a way to lessen anxieties about grades as well as exploring the self-concept concerning being a student who is also an athlete. This can be an arena for the athlete to work through stereotypes and gain greater self-confidence concerning academics.

Interventions regarding career concerns could be initiated on all three previously cited levels. Program interventions can provide education about the world of work in the form of workshops where alumni who were athletes in college come to talk to the student athletes about their experiences post graduation. Also, a general orientation to the career resources in the

university career center could be helpful. Career counseling would focus on career issues while being sensitive to the context of the athlete could take place in a group or individually as a way to understand self in relation to work. Testing athletes regarding their unique interests, abilities, and values could be incorporated into the counseling as well as processing career decision making skills based on career maturity level.

Time management classes may be another intervention that may help athletes deal with multiple role responsibilities. Athletes have to balance a great many tasks while in college (classes, practices, and games). A formal class on how to manage these tasks efficiently may help alleviate fears of becoming overwhelmed.

Future Research

Several studies could be formulated to follow-up findings in the current study. First, career confusion seems to be an issue that the athletes are struggling with. Investigating which interventions are more effective with athletes in career counseling could help academic advisors and career counselors working with athletes. Also, determining how athletes make career decisions as well as how their career maturity level influences their choice of major may be critical to understanding career concerns. More data are needed concerning what makes athletes more uncertain about their major when compared to nonathletes. Indeed, ascertaining the degree of career guidance that athletes receive seems needed. Also, studying how the athletic department

influences decision making styles of student athletes may provide useful information.

Another area for research is gathering data regarding self-concept of athletes as students. They seem more concerned about grades and less confident in obtaining good grades. Being in an environment where on is valued more for physical accomplishments and less for academic pursuits could have important impacts on self-concept attitudes. Exploring these attitudes further may shed more light on these findings.

It may also be instructive to follow up the finding that athletes felt that alcohol and drug issues were important for society to address and resolve. Gathering more data concerning attitudes to alcohol and drugs as well as experiences with alcohol and drugs may yield needed directions for program implementation.

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